

Ivan Turgenev's Fathers and Sons and
the Clash of Generations in
Mid-19th Century Russia

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Written in 1862, Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* is not just an examination of the general conflicts between generations in all ages, but an attempt to highlight a very unique generational conflict in the mid 19th century brought on by Russia's rapid advance into modernity. Set just a few years before it was published, Turgenev's book makes comment on a conflict as it is still playing itself out in Russia. It is not Turgenev's purpose to pick a better generation or ideology out of this time period, instead he concludes the book with the surviving characters living in an almost ignorant existence in regards to the conflicting ideologies of the young Bazarov and cultured Paul Petrovich. The quarrel between Bazarov, the self proclaimed nihilist, and Paul, the Western styled gentleman,¹ is what Turgenev uses to illustrate the difficulty Russians of both generations had in light of what was going on around them at the time.

Already at the beginning of the 19th century in Russia the younger generation strained against the Russia of their fathers. The seeds that were planted by Peter the Great a century ago which led to a more westernized Russia had sprouted resulting in the use of many western conventions like the use of French by the nobles and Prussian style military uniforms. Still Russia saw itself as being on the outside looking in towards the more powerful European states. Figures like Pushkin and other intellectuals of the first quarter of the 19th century would write about their pride in being Russian and also lament on its backwardness. The Westernizers and Slavophiles in the 30s and 40s made their complaints and drew out their plans for change more clearly than the previous generation of intellectuals, but both generations agreed that Russia had a long way to go to garner the respect they thought their state was capable of earning. Paul Petrovich was also a product of the generation which embraced European culture. He was educated in a European style military academy where he learned French, traveled to Europe due to his love affairs, and wore English dress. His nephew Arcady called him "a society lion in his day."² He had lived the high life in St. Petersburg that every young man of his day had dreamed of. Most importantly for Paul and the well to do young men of his generation were the principles on honor and dignity. When Paul is introduced to the reader in 1859, he is still strongly attached to these principles despite his signs of age and the fact that he is living far from the St. Petersburg or the cities of Europe. Bazarov is a product of something European as well, calling himself a nihilist, something he had adopted during his studies in St. Petersburg. His generation had seen the good that Paul's generation had done for Russia, suppression by the government isolated Russia from the revolutions of 1848, setting back reform, once again Russia was humiliated in war, this time in the Crimea, and the cries for the emancipation of the serfs were growing louder. The generation Bazarov represents is a reaction to this generation and it is little surprise that Bazarov and Paul cannot see eye to eye, because a man trying to hold on to his dignity cannot stand to be told that his generation had meant nothing, especially by a younger man. Not only is it irksome to Paul that Bazarov means this, it is probably more irksome to him that these nihilist teachings have invaded the society in which he identified himself 20 or so years before.

If Paul Petrovich and Bazarov represent the extremes in difference between succeeding generations, then what can be made of the relationships between Arcady and Nicholas and Bazarov and his parents? These relationships in *Fathers and Sons* represent the much more

¹ Bazarov refers to him repeatedly as a "Slavophile" but he is clearly not in the same category as Aksakov or Khomiakov. If anything he would be considered a westernizer. Perhaps Bazarov saw Paul as a Slavophile simply because he dressed and spoke in the style of what Bazarov considered an older generation of Russian.

² Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons* (New York: Signet Classics, 2005), 18.

common place interactions between generations of the same family. As with intergenerational relationships today, there is a certain allowance of ignorance, indifference, or understanding between the generations. Nicolas Petrovich and Vassily Ivanich *had* sons and seemed to understand more so than Paul that young men were prone to change and that differences should be put aside to allow the young men to figure things out for themselves as they had done earlier in their own lives. Of course these adaptable characters reflect the majority of the population of Russia who do not make the noise that people like Paul and Bazarov make when they disagree. Turgenev shows us that the relatively pleasant relationships between fathers and sons in the novel are in stark contrast to the exceptional conflicts between the ideologies that defined the intellectual heights of their generations. Bazarov and Paul Petrovich both feel that no understanding is owed to the other. In Russia, the conflict between generations remained more, for the most part, static. In the book, Paul forces Bazarov into a duel. By accepting the duel, Bazarov concedes a small victory to the principles of Paul's generation, and by winning the duel, Bazarov gains a victory for his generation and the two characters come to an understanding of sorts and agree to go their separate ways. The novel concludes with Bazarov's death and Paul's attempted escape to Europe in hopes of avoiding the decline into mediocrity he sees on the horizon while the rest of the characters go on enjoying the more "simplistic" life in the countryside, an illustration displaying the big picture of Russia at the time.

The conflict between Bazarov and Paul Petrovich does accentuate some of the particular differences between their generations, but there were other generalities in this regard floating around Russia through the 19th century. To some intellectuals, the high minded dissidence of the generation of Herzen and Belinskii had given way to crude violence like with the populist. For some younger Russians in the 1860's and 70's, the leaders of the earlier generations were not radical enough in demanding reforms that would fall short of anarchy or revolution. Something important to realize about Russia in the 19th century is not only the rapid drive to modernize Russia to be on par with Europe, but the rapid increase in the number of intellectuals throughout the 19th century. At the beginning of the century, it was possible for anyone who was someone in St. Petersburg, to know everyone else that was someone. Throughout the century, the opportunities for more people to become educated made it possible to have a pool of intellectuals large enough to split into intellectual factions with a wider range of opinions and philosophies. Paul Petrovich and Bazarov had attached themselves to philosophies popular at the time and place (St. Petersburg) that were not compatible with each other because Russia was changing so rapidly in the 19th century. It is also important to remember that Russian society for so long had been a very traditional society, and still is to this day in some areas of their culture. The differing ideologies that sprang from Russia in the 19th century almost seem like reactions to any tradition, including the tradition of the last new wave of intellectuals. In this kind of atmosphere where rebellion against the common notion is the goal of the newest group of intellectual, it is easy to see why there were these incompatibilities between generations of Russians in the 19th century.

Bibliography

Turgenev, Ivan. *Fathers and Sons*. Translated by Jane Costlow. New York: Signet Classics, 2005.